

HISTORY OF BUSHMASTER

The first dean of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU) F. Edward Hébert School of Medicine, Dr. Jay Sanford, stated the educational objective of the curriculum is: “To prepare the graduate to serve successfully, following internship, as a general medical officer in the emergency room of a fixed military medical facility or as a general medical officer at the forward-most point on the modern battlefield at which physicians are positioned.”

Dr. Sanford believed that the totality of the USU required curriculum in the basic sciences, clinical sciences, and military medicine formed a unique intellectual basis for this educational objective. He directed that the school’s academic faculty create a formal curricular element using the structure of a military field exercise to test the ability of the students to meet the second element of this educational objective; he envisioned this exercise not as “field training,” but as a “graduate level educational laboratory experience conducted in the field” during the senior year of medical school.

More than 30 years ago, Congress established USU as the nation’s military medical academic university and it was in those formative years that Dr. Sanford’s vision created what has come to be known as Operation Bushmaster.

At that time, there was not, and had never been, any such academic enterprise in American medical education. In fact, American military medical training had abandoned even medical field training exercises for medical corps officers in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The university faculty would have to create this program from scratch, formally evaluate the program’s outcomes, and modify the program’s curriculum on the basis of those formal evaluations.

In 1978, Dr. Sanford appointed then Army Lt. Col. Barry Wolcott, MC, to USU’s faculty to serve as the project officer for the Senior Course in Operational and Emergency Medicine, as which he served until the fall of 1982.

The first evolution of this unnamed academic endeavor took place in the fall of 1979 at the Army’s field medical operations area at Camp Bullis, Texas, for the 29 students of the charter 1980 medical school class. The exercise’s Operations Officer, Army Maj. Dennis Dugan, MSC, supplied the “Bushmaster” name before the second evolution in the fall of 1980; despite the fact that the name had no particular significance, it “stuck.”

By 1981, expansion of class size required running the exercise twice; once the medical school reached the current class size of 165, it was necessary to run the exercise three times a year.

The Bushmaster exercise has had several important derivatives. These include:

The Combat Casualty Care Course (C4); the university created this course based upon the Bushmaster curriculum for the services as the American military’s first recurring tri-service training program (medical or otherwise);

The Military Training Network; the university was the first military medical element to routinely train medical officers in Advanced Cardiac Life Support and Advanced Trauma Life Support, Tactical Combat Casualty Care, and therefore created this mechanism to maintain their proficiency after graduation;

The “spin-off” from the senior year curriculum of Operation Kerkesner to be conducted at the end of the freshman year.

Obviously, Bushmaster has contributed more than 3,900 graduates to military medical service since that first evolution in 1979. However, as with any academic endeavor, Bushmaster’s most important legacy will remain the military medical intellectual capital created, nurtured, refined and expanded by the USU faculty responsible for this unique curricular element during the 27 years of its existence.

Throughout those past 27 years, the operation has gone from being held several times a year at different locations such as San Antonio, Texas, to most recently being conducted once a year over a 10 day period at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania (FIG).

Dr. Sanford’s original vision of a graduate level educational laboratory experience conducted in the field during the senior year of medical school has since included students from the Graduate School of Nursing, and foreign exchange students.

In 2005 and 2006, the Department of Military and Emergency Medicine (MEM) held both Operation Bushmaster and Operation Kerkesner simultaneously at FIG over a 10 day period. This year both field exercises will be conducted in July, again at FIG.

For a follow up to this year’s Operations Bushmaster/Kerkesner and how the simultaneous exercises came to be, look for Part II of the History of Bushmaster in a future issue of the USU Newsletter.

